

Christian Stance on the State of Israel

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

With the outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war in 25 years, the hatreds, fears, and suspicions that have long infected Muslim-Jewish relations in the Middle East have once again erupted.

At the same time, as the fighting raged and threatened ominously to expand, the question of a Christian stance vis-a-vis the State of Israel as an independent political entity received renewed urgency.

The history of the land that was later called Palestine is a complex tale of trial, tension, and strife.

In Biblical times, the land of Canaan was the home of scattered Hebrew tribes. By about 1000 B.C. a Hebrew Kingdom was firmly established, under King David. After the reign of Solomon, the kingdom split into two states, Israel and Judah, which were respectively destroyed by Assyria and Babylonia.

In the 7th Century, the region was conquered by the Muslims, and remained under Arab domination until World War I, when it came under British control.

Prior to the British takeover, the first Aliyah (wave of immigration) of Jews from Russia and East Europe to Palestine had begun in 1882. Five years later, the World Zionist Congress declared its aim: "to create for Jewish people a home in Palestine."

A second Aliyah, 1904-1914, increased Jewish population to some 85,000.

Then, on Nov. 2, 1917, came the famous Declaration of Arthur James Lord Balfour, British secretary of state for foreign affairs:

"His Majesty's government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people . . . it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," including 600,000 Arabs.

On June 30, 1920, the British military administration of Palestine came to an end, and the next day Sir Herbert Samuel took over as the first British high commissioner in Palestine. In that same year Arabs rioted in protest against surging Jewish immigration.

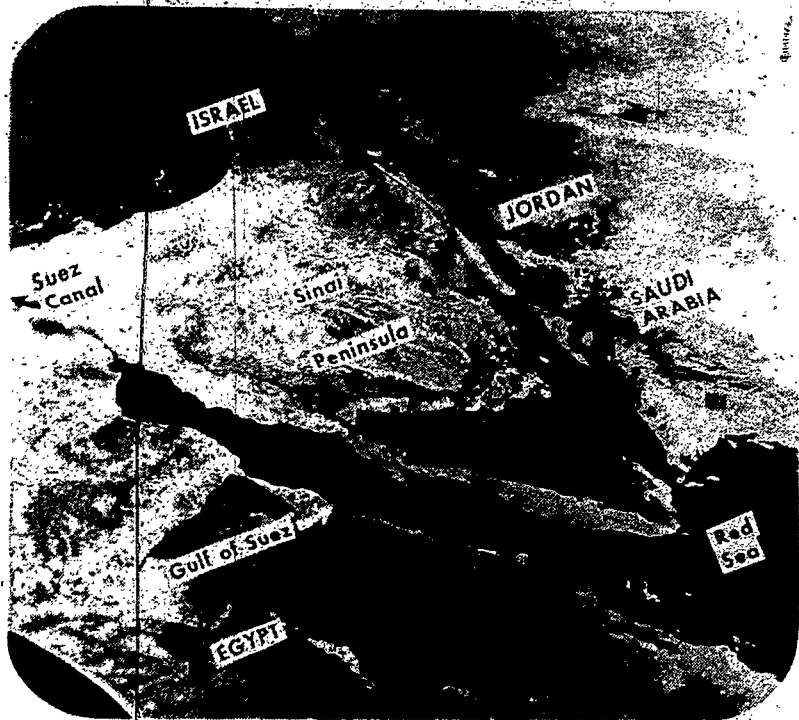
During the years 1936-1939, a six-month general strike by Palestinian Arabs was followed by full-scale rebellion against British authority and Jewish settlers. The revolt ended with a British White Paper restricting Jewish immigration — at a time when hundreds of thousands of Jews were seeking refuge from Nazi persecution.

On Nov. 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a plan to partition Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states, thus bringing the British Mandate to a close.

On May 14, 1948, Premier David Ben-Gurion formally proclaimed the State of Israel. The next day six Arab armies invaded the newly-proclaimed nation, but within weeks were defeated by the Israelis on every front.

When the fighting ended, Israel was in possession of 50 per cent more territory than originally granted, and was left with the festering problem of thousands of homeless Arab refugees — still a major factor of the Mid-East equation.

In 1950, following Israel's proclamation of the Law of Return, which gives Jews anywhere the right to Israeli citizenship, there was a huge



This photo, made from 175 miles above the earth by Gemini astronauts in the 1960s, focuses on the Middle East area, where war rages between Israel and Arab countries. [RNS]

surge of immigration, climaxed by a massive airlift of 47,000 Yemenite Jews.

In 1956, after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, Israeli forces invaded the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula, while Britain and France attacked Egypt.

All three invading forces were forced to withdraw under pressure from the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Nations. A U.N. peace-keeping force was established as a buffer along the Sinai frontier in 1957.

Ten years later, in May, at the demand of President Nasser, the U.N. force withdrew from the Sinai, and Egypt moved in massive armor.

The following June 5, the Six Day War erupted when Israel, fearing an Arab attack, struck first, speedily defeated Arab forces, and captured the (Syrian) Golan Heights, the (Jordanian) West Bank, and the entire Sinai peninsula.

On Nov. 22, 1967, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 242, calling for Israeli withdrawal from "territories occupied" in the June 5-10 war and for Arab recognition of Israeli sovereignty and territorial integrity "within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." The exact meaning of the U.N. resolution has since been hotly debated.

President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, who came to power in 1970 following the death of President Nasser, lost no time in allying himself with Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil-producing countries in the hope of putting pressure on the U.S. to push Israel into a Middle East settlement acceptable to Arabs.

In September 1973, Egypt and Syria were reconciled at an Arab summit meeting, with Jordan's King Hussein. Hussein granted amnesty to Palestinian guerrillas imprisoned during his fierce 1970 clampdown — the action that had caused the estrangement.

Later that same month, Syria and Israel fought a major air battle, with Syria losing 13 planes.

Then, on Oct. 6, Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, Egyptian troops surged across the Suez Canal and Syrian soldiers struck in the north on the Golan Heights and the fourth Arab-Israeli war was on.

Against this background there arises, once more, the question of Christian attitudes toward Israel's survival as a juridical entity.

One such attitude was recently set forth in the U.S. in a major statement on Christian-Jewish relations, the fruit of a four-year study by a group including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek-Orthodox, and Protestant scholars with a special interest in the field.

The "Theological Statement," as it was called, declared: "The validity of the State of Israel rests on moral and juridical grounds."

Admitting that there was no consensus among Christians regarding the relations "between the chosen people and the territory comprising the present State of Israel," the statement said that the Book of Genesis explicitly affirms a connection between the people and the land (Gen. 15:18), and even within the New Testament certain passages imply such a connection.

"Therefore," the statement argued, "Christians who see Israel as something more than a political state are now wrongly theologizing politics by understanding the existence of the Jewish state in theological terms."

The statement was prepared by a Study Group on Christian-Jewish Relations convened in 1969 under the aegis of the National Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order and the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The National Conference of Christians and Jews later became a cooperative agency.

Earlier, in April of 1973, a similar — and at the time, unprecedented — statement was issued by a committee of the French Roman Catholic hierarchy, affirming the Jewish people's right to nationhood:

"Beyond the legitimate divergencies of political appeals, universal conscience cannot refuse to the Jewish people, which has undergone so many vicissitudes in the course of history, the right and the means to a political existence."

According to Bishop Arthur Elchinger of Strasbourg, head of the bishop's Committee for Relations with Judaism, the declaration constitutes an "implicit recognition" of the State of Israel.

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